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| Four score and seven years ago | A “score” is twenty years. Lincoln was stating that some important event happened 87 years before. Do the math. The year was 1863; 87 years before that the founding fathers (Adams, Franklin, Jefferson [Washington and Hamilton were fighting in the war] and others) signed the Declaration of Independence. |
| our fathers | These were the gentlemen mentioned above. |
| brought forth on this continent, | The word “continent” should bring to mind Columbus, Jamestown, Pilgrims, Puritans, Quakers, etc. Even in 1863, the North American and South American continents were relatively new on the world scene. |
| a new nation, | Think about it. Eighty-seven years is not that long. America was still a “new” nation when Lincoln stood up to give his speech. The “fathers” had brought forth a new nation and the people involved in the Civil War were still trying to figure out how to run the new nation. |
| conceived in Liberty, | >The date was 1776 (87 years before). The idea—the “conceived” idea—was “Liberty.” The colonies wanted liberty from Great Britain.  >The word “conceive” also has in it the idea of birth. To have a baby is to “conceive” a baby. To “conceive” is to “give birth.” America was “born” or “birthed” in liberty.  >Lincoln echoed this idea when he mentioned “*new* birth of freedom” later in the Gettysburg Address. This was intentional. America had a “birth.” Lincoln was now calling for a “*new* birth.” |
| and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. | Fraud. Lie. Propaganda. America, the actual country born in 1776, was *not* dedicated to the “proposition that all men are created equal.” People of African lineage were free only in sections of the country. The vast majority were slaves. With this phrase, Lincoln began to communicate his real purpose. Everyone in the audience would have realized that Lincoln was now arriving at his central point. The date of the Gettysburg Address was November, 1863. The Emancipation Proclamation had been in effect since January, 1863. The impact was being felt. African-Americans were fleeing at every opportunity to join Union ranks. Others were outright escaping from their slavery, while still others were sabotaging the rebel effort by slowing work or damaging equipment. [Still remaining—not mentioned here—was the unequal treatment of women.] |
| Now we are engaged in a great civil war, | No kidding. The death toll had risen beyond anyone’s expectation. One politician had predicted that all the blood that would be shed would be absorbed in a handkerchief. No one. No one. No one thought the war would become so desperate…with oceans of blood. |
| testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. | This was all a “test.” Lincoln, and many others, continued to think of America as a “test.” Again, America was only eighty-seven years old. So the Revolution worked. So the War of 1812 worked. But what about the really tough business of actually running a nation? Would it work? Could you really take the ideas of Locke and Montesquieu—just Enlightenment intellectuals—and really build a country around their ideas? It was easy for them to sit in their quiet libraries and write about all this “inalienable rights” stuff and “balance of power,” but to really, actually run a country based on these ideas…could it work? Really. All this talk about, “We, the people….” Was it all a dream? Could you listen to the “people,” and actually accomplish anything as a nation? Can the idea “endure”? Can that nation live? |
| We are met on a great battlefield of that war. | “Here we are, Ladies and Gentlemen. It happened right here. Terrible devastation and death. Horrible sacrifice of life.” |
| We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. | “Right here on this battlefield, we will set apart a place for the dead. They died for a nation ‘conceived in liberty’ and which now is *beginning* to be‘dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.’” |
| It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. | This is the right thing to do…honor the dead. |
| But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. | The word “consecrate” comes from the Latin word “sacrare” which means "to make sacred, consecrate." A church is nothing but a bunch of bricks and cement until a “holy person” consecrates it. The word “hallow” means “to make holy.” Halloween comes right before a holy day. |
| The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. | We have no place whatever to judge what these “brave men” did. Through their sacrifice, they are “far above” us. |
| The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. | We can talk, but their actions made all the difference. |
| It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. | This is a tricky sentence to memorize. Get this one and you are home free. Lincoln has stated that the “work” is to “make the nation live.” The “brave men” who fought at Gettysburg have advanced the effort of national survival a great deal. They have “nobly” advanced the effort. |
| It is for us rather to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us— | Now you are in the home stretch. This part of the speech has five clauses. |
| that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion— | The dead devoted everything they had to the “great task.” They died for the task. We must learn from their devotion and “take” from that devotion so that we might feel more devotion to the “great task.” |
| that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain— | To die “in vain” is to die for nothing. What greater tragedy could happen than to die for nothing? We must not let this happen. |
| that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom— | Remember the fraud mentioned at the beginning? That the nation was “born” in “liberty” and “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal”? Here Lincoln says that the nation should be “born” again, only this time be honest about equality. This will require a “*new birth*” and an honest dedication to the proposition that all men are created equal. |
| and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth. | Here, Lincoln spoke to the ages and to all people everywhere on earth. He did *not* say, “*this* government.” He referred to “government” in general…all government everywhere. He made a statement, but, in effect, he asked, “Can we do this? Is it possible for *human beings everywhere* to create…and keep…governments that are dedicated to the inalienable rights of individuals?” For him, everything depended on this great task. |

1. In the first sentence, what does Lincoln tell us about this new nation?
2. What is being tested by this war?
3. When Lincoln says the nation was "so conceived and so dedicated," to what is he referring?
4. What is the point of including the phrase "or any nation so conceived and so dedicated"? What would the sentence mean without it?
5. What did those who fought at Gettysburg do that those who have gathered cannot?
6. How does Lincoln use the idea of "unfinished work" to assign responsibility to his listeners?
7. To what specific ideas does Lincoln ask his listeners to commit themselves at the end of his speech?
8. How does the meaning of the word "dedicate" change over the course of the text, and what does it reveal about the Gettysburg address?